

Marcel Ray Duriez

Nevaeh

Book: 63

Moments that Would not Fade

Part: 1

(Kristen's life on Earth)

Films of Kristen Deniel

1

The home was falling apart...
anyone could see that, and even from the
road, even from the car that I was sitting
in with my legs hanging out, the side vent
window tilted, I could even see that from
the road, anyone could see that all the
homes to say it- were all just dumps,
sorry- I am not holding back on saying the
truth; All the homes were not what you
would call fine... nevertheless, that was
okay with me it was a home.

Kristen stopped to kiss Gram, and then she was walking toward them, feeling a little shy, but only for a moment, since Noah was pulling Nevaeh- May down the steps, and she could hear him saying, 'It's Kristen, it's my best friend, Kristen,' And there he was with the same mop of dark hair, and those bright blue eyes, and next to him, a girl with the same eyes, and she was smiling too.

And then she saw that Gram was pointing, nodding at her, and smiling. Kristen looked toward the Smiths' house, almost knowing what she was going to see, not believing it could happen, that it

was not just Mrs. Meyer waiting at the door. She thought about the cat. Of course, Noah had kept the cat. That meant.

The home was wood in color, just naked standard wood siding- nothing to scream about, yet by the looks of this home, it looks as if someone inside it should be with the lights flickering on and off, like something out of a horror film, or the 1924's. The color and feeling- of that of- starting graying death. And God, look at the door it is just hanging in there on its hinges, like me in a way- like me.

Films of Kristen Deniel

Outside it was almost dark. A sliver of moon curved over the Old Man's Mountain, and a lone star was just visible. 'A planet, Kristen,' Green might say. 'Get your astronomy in order.'

If I cried again, the tears would freeze fast to my cheeks.

The snow was so dry I could hear the creaking of my footsteps as I went past the holly bushes. No one could guess they were there, mounded up like soft

white pillows, and the river in front of me
had disappeared.

I stood still to look at it all. I
wondered how I could draw that to show
the world underneath: sharp, shiny leaves
hidden in the snow, the river running fast
and cold under the ice.

In my mind was a picture of
Beatrice brushing her hair off her
forehead. 'Drawing is a language,' she
had said. 'You have to learn to speak it.'

In the distance was the faint
sound of a saw: Someone must be cutting
wood for a fire. I closed my eyes. Green is

and the Old Man turning their heads.

Roger saw they would say. He must be in the apple orchard, or Hopper has finally gotten to that dead elm.

No, it was not a saw. It was the sound of a snowmobile, on the other side of the mountain.

A clump of snow fell off the roof of the house. I looked back at it, at the house where I wanted to belong. Huge icicles hung from the eaves, and suddenly I was so cold I could not stay outside anymore. Upstairs in my bedroom, I sat at the edge of the bed shivering, waiting

until I was warm; then I went to my
backpack and pulled out my films to
spread across the bumpy white
bedspread.

I saw how much blue I had used
in those summer drawings: blue for the
river, blue for the Old Man's rugs, blue
for Izzy's locket; and green: a smudge of
the tree, a leaf, the edge of the mountain.
Both colors I loved.

The films I had drawn of Gram lay
in the middle of the bed.

Gram on the pier, reaching for
seagrass; Gram outside in her tree

garden, shades of peach and lilac; Gram happy, Gram where she belonged.

Gram did not belong here. She belonged in her house with Beatrice, and Henry, and the irritable pelican on her wall.

She belonged near the ocean.

I sat there for a long time, my head against the headboard, knowing what I had to do. I rubbed my hands, still icy cold. It was four miles to the telephone outside the grocery store, a long walk, but I could do it. I would call Beatrice... ask her, beg her.

We would go home, Gram and I, Gram to Beatrice, me to another place. I looked at a half-finished picture of Izzy at the cemetery with a vase of daisies in her hand. What had she said that day? 'I wanted children for every corner of the house.' And what else? There was something more she had said, something about Green is and the Old Man. 'It's worse this summer.'

I would have to stop thinking about Izzy, put all of them out of my mind. Before I left, I would get rid of all the films of them, burn the drawings in the

fireplace. I would forget about Izzy and the Old Man, forget about Green's.

I stared down at the drawing of Izzy backing out of the door with my WELCOME TO THE FAMILY cake and saw something I had not remembered: The Old Man's hand on Greens' shoulder.

Me, catching my first fish. Green is in front of me with the net, the Old Man smiling. But he is looking at Green, not at me.

Looking and smiling.

And another: Green is hanging into the engine of a car, just the back of

him visible, with mismatched socks, and the Old Man with his hands on his hips, but his eyes are soft.

Beatrice was in my head again.
What had she said to me one time?
'Sometimes we learn from our drawings;
things are there that we thought we
didn't know.'

My lips were suddenly dry.

I stood up, walked around to the other side of the bed. There they were in the boat. Green's laughing at something the Old Man had said.

How had I drawn all that and not seen it?

Of course, the Old Man loved Green's. He was going to love him whether I was there or not. Had I given them up for nothing, the whole family?

What do you know about a family? Green is said in my mind. You have never had one.

I remembered what Izzy had said then: 'They have to find their way.'

I picked up another picture: me with candy in my mouth. Then there was something else floating just on the edge

of my mind. Something to do with the radio? Why the radio?

Wait, I told myself. What had Gram said about wanting Santa to bring a radio?

And then I had it. The two of us were joking. 'Santa on a sleigh,' I had said.

'That was a hundred years ago. Now he comes on...'

...A snowmobile? To bring the candy? Green's? The pancakes, and the applesauce?

I slid off the bed, the picture
drifting out of my hand, my knuckles up
to my mouth.

The sweater hanging on the shed
doorknob.

Holly on the back step. 'Peace,
Kristen.'

I felt as if I could hardly breathe.

And then I was flying down the
stairs, my feet barely touching the steps,
skittering on the Old Man's shiny floor,
coming to a stop in front of Gram asleep
on the couch.

I sat down next to her, one hand on Henry's rough fur.

‘Wake up, Gram,’ I said. ‘I want to ask you about Santa Claus.’ Films of Kristen Deniel Gram slept through my questions, her head nestled on the couch cushions, and Henry with her, purring faintly with his eyes closed. She slept as I shook her, slept as I begged her, ‘Please, Gram, I cannot wait to know,’ slept as I offered her soup from a can, Izzy's candy, a cup of tea.

Then, at last, I gave up. I looked at the black square that was the window.

The moon had disappeared behind the Old Man's Mountain, and the star was gone.

I went into the kitchen to make something to eat: the rest of the tuna with canned pineapple thrown on top, and a few frosted flakes for crunch. I ate it at the kitchen counter, wolfing it down, made hot chocolate, and when it had cooled a little, put it under Gram's nose. 'Smells good, doesn't it? Just open your eyes, take a sip, and talk to me.'

She smiled in her sleep as I kissed her forehead, and then I went

upstairs to bed, lying awake for a long time, feeling the tick of my heart in my throat.

The holly had just blown onto the back step. Gram had found the candy in the house. Maybe. Maybe.

But then as I fell asleep, I could almost hear his voice in my head. Merry Christmas, Kristen Copses.

I was awake in the first light the next morning. It was a beautiful day, with sunshine melting the ice on the window. I went downstairs and Gram was still asleep on the couch, but Henry was

awake, stretching his skinny legs. I let him out and stood in the doorway, hugging myself, squinting at that glittering world, listening for the sawing sound of a snowmobile.

And then Gram opened her eyes.

I began slowly. 'Christmas was yesterday,' I said.

She smiled at me.

'Santa Claus is coming...' I sang.

'...To town,' she finished.

'He came to us,' I said.

'In all this snow,' she said.

‘But what did he look like?’

She ran her hand over her face, thinking. ‘He looked cold,’ she said.

‘And he gave you the candy.’

‘One time,’ she said, ‘when Beatrice and I were little, he brought mittens. Red for Beatrice, blue for me. We each swapped one. All winter, we wore one blue and one red.’

I went over to her and touched her hair. ‘I’m going to call Beatrice,’ I said.

‘Are we going home?’ She asked.

‘Maybe,’ I said. ‘I think so. Can you wait here? It is a long walk to the phone. I’ll be gone most of the morning.’

I heard a few fragments of the song as she wandered into the kitchen. ‘If it takes forever, I will wait...’

I made breakfast for both of us, a heap of frosted flakes; then I layered on sweaters, three pairs of Greens’ socks, my jacket, and turned to Gram for one last try. ‘Where did you get the candy?’ I asked.

‘It's in a tin box,’ she said.

‘Orange and lemon. Makes your mouth wiggle.’

‘I'll be back.’ I opened the door, hearing the drip of melting icicles from the roof, and stepped back as Henry darted inside.

Outside I thought at first of taking the road. What difference would it make if I were caught?

But it would make a difference. I wanted to call Beatrice first. I wanted to hear that she had come to live with Gram.

And suppose she does not? Green is asked.

I shook my head. She will. I think she will.

I brushed him away, trudging along through the trees, listening to the call of the crows, the screech of the blue jays. And all the time I was listening to that buzzing sound of the snowmobile, telling myself I had made the whole thing up, telling myself it was not Green's.

And what if it was Green's? I asked myself. What would I say to him?

It must have been twenty minutes later when I heard the faint sound of the motor. It could have been anyone, but still, I ran toward the road, trying to pick up my feet in that deep snow.

I saw him, a helmet on his head, thick gloves on his hands, bent over the handles of the snowmobile, and I stepped out onto the road just in time for him to see me and glide to a stop.

I stood there, biting my lip, feeling that river of tears coming, at last, waiting for that brief second as he pushed

up the visor. 'Kristen Copses,' he said.

'Where are you going?'

'Green's Regan,' I said, my mouth trembling. 'Happy birthday.'

And then we were laughing, both of us, laughing instead of crying.

'Thank you for the candy,' I said, at last, looking at his face, thinner, bonier. Something about his eyes seemed older.

'Horrible stuff, that candy,' he said.

'And the holly branch.'

He tilted his head a little. 'Kristen Copses,' he said again.

'How did you know I was here?'

He raised one shoulder. 'There was a letter from the agency looking for you.'

I nodded, thinking about the hot cocoa woman sending lost girl letters to every house I had ever been in.

'I told Pop.' Green is swiped at his glasses. "'Kristen loves that house,' I said. But did he listen? Of course not.'

I swallowed. 'You and the Old Man are still arguing.'

'If she loved that house so much, she would be with us right now,' Pop said. But I knew. I've been here every day except during the massive storm.'

I was shivering in the cold, the wind blowing around us, my feet beginning to feel numb.

'We've been hoping you'd come home all these months,' he said. 'Why not, Holly?'

And then I was crying, big sloppy tears. I leaned against the handlebars,

making terrible sounds in my throat, and I just could not seem to stop.

Green stood there, his hands dangling in those huge gloves, and then he reached out, put his arms around me, pulling me toward him.

‘The Old Man went down to Long Island when he heard you were missing,’ he said. ‘He's going crazy looking for you. He keeps going back and forth.’

‘Why didn't you tell him?’

‘I wanted to do that for you, at least that. Give you time.’ He paused. ‘You're famous. Your picture is in the

newspapers. A pretty awful-looking picture if you ask me.'

As he rattled on, I kept sniffing and wiping my eyes, and then I would start to cry again.

'I knew you'd be safe.' He took one arm off my shoulder to wave it around. 'As long as I kept an eye on you and your friend.'

'You have a nerve,' I said.

'You'd have starved to death without the food I brought.'

He frowned and began again. 'I still don't know why...'

'I thought...' I began and bit my lip. I would never tell him what I had thought about the Old Man not loving him. 'You were always arguing, and I thought it had to do with...' I waved my hands.

'With you?' he said. 'Oh, Holly. It does not have to do with anyone. I told you that. It's just the way we are.'

I stared down the road, not a car in sight, the trees heavy with snow, bent and leaning.

‘I’m a slob and he’s neat. I forget, he remembers. We drive each other crazy. But it’s all right.’

I ran my hands over my cheeks, tried to dry them. As simple as that, just the way they were.

‘I told you,’ he said, his head tilted, his eyes smiling. ‘You don’t know about families yet.’ He leaned back against the snowmobile. ‘He knew the accident was my fault.’

I sighed. ‘It was my fault.’

‘Everything has to be your fault all the time?’

I shrugged a little. 'After the accident, Pop said they'd told him you never stayed in one place exceptionally long. But he said we were different, and that it must be something else. And that is what it was? You thought-'

'I messed up the family.' 'Wait till he hears this,' Green is said. 'Just wait.'

I watched the snow drifting off the trees. Old Man, I love you. Green has rubbed my shoulders; he must have seen that I was shivering. 'I put the fishing pole away for you in the shed, and looped the sweater over the knob.'

‘The fishing poles?’ My hand went to my mouth. ‘I forgot about the fishing pole. All this time.’

‘Ha, Kristen Copses, there's hope for you, I told you that. I am going to spend next summer fixing up the old truck. What do you say? Want to help? Want to come home?’

I did not say anything. I did not have to. I climbed up on the back of the snowmobile. ‘Take me to the telephone booth down at the grocery,’ I said.

He gunned the motor and the snow spewed out behind us as we flew up the highway to call Beatrice.

Films of Kristen Deniel

Green stood next to me in that freezing phone booth, his eyeglasses steamy and small puffs of smoke coming out of his mouth. He talked the whole time. 'I told Izzy not to worry, that you'd be home by Christmas.' He waggled his eyebrows. 'Of course, I knew where you were.'

‘Wait,’ I said, dialing the number I had memorized all those weeks ago. ‘I can't hear.’

‘And the day after Christmas is pretty close.’ He grinned at me.

Then Beatrice's sweet voice was in my ear, soft and a little breathless.

‘It's me,’ I said. ‘Kristen Copses.’

For a moment she did not answer. When she began to speak, it seemed as if she could not stop. ‘I've been calling for days, Kristen,’ she said. ‘Where are you? Is Gram all right? Do you know

where Gram is? Please know. I've been so worried.' She paused, out of breath now.

I closed my eyes: Beatrice worried, Gram unhappy, the Old Man looking for me. What had I done?

'She's with me,' I said.

Greens' voice was still in my head even though he was standing right next to me. If you had not made that mess, you might never have come home.

'Gram wants to come home. She remembers home, but she forgets so much else,' I told Beatrice. 'The agency

isn't going to let her stay there alone. And they want me to go somewhere else.'

'I'm coming home, Kristen. I am coming home right now.

Do not worry. I'll move right in with Gram.' Her voice sounded excited. 'I'm already sick of painting the desert. I need some snow in my life. I need to see Gram and Henry.'

Green has clapped his hands together for warmth. 'We started in your room anyway,' he said. 'I told the Old Man we'd paint it green, green for holly.'

‘Beatrice, she’ll be so glad to see you,’ I said, looking at Green, listening to them both at once.

‘But the Old Man wanted your room blue,’ Green is said.

“Kristen loves blue,’ he kept telling us. What does he know?

French Blue, he calls it.’

Films of Kristen Deniel

‘My cousin Beatrice would love this,’ Gram said, looking around the room.
‘If only...’

I had never seen anything so beautiful, so Christmassy either. Pine Laurel Highlands were everywhere. We had found candles, a dozen, and lit all of them. The ornaments sparkled in the light. And then I thought of what Gram had begun to say. 'If only what?' I asked.

She shrugged a little. 'Beatrice and I spent every Christmas together. She remembers things for me when I forget, things about when we were young.' Her forehead wrinkled. 'Fishing off the jetties.'

I felt a lump in my throat. 'She'll be home someday,' I said, but I wondered when that would be.

'Next year?' Gram said.

I looked out the window. I did not like to think about it next year. Where would we be then?

'Just a minute,' I told her. 'Close your eyes.'

I went down the hall for the picture I had drawn and laid it on the table to flicker in the candlelight. 'Gram herself,' I said, 'with Beatrice.'

She drew in her breath, leaning over it, running one finger along the edge. 'We're young.' She smiled up at me. 'And look at that popcorn machine.' Head tilted, she spotted Henry batting a piece of popcorn across the floor. 'You have to keep looking to see everything,' she said.

She stood up then and patterned away from me into the kitchen. She came back with a round tin in her hand. 'This is from Santa Claus.'

I touched the tin. 'Where did you find this?'

Izzy's hard candies: Izzy standing
on the porch one sunny afternoon,
holding a tin out to me. 'Lemon drops,
and oranges. They'll make you sweat,
make you love.' She had leaned forward
to touch my shoulder.

'You always lump one cheek,'
Green has told me days later as I worked
my way through the candy. 'It's going to
freeze like that.'

Oh, Izzy. Oh, Green's.

I opened the tin and held it out to
Gram. 'You get first to pick.' Another

thing I had to pay back. I could not just take Izzy's candies.

‘Take them,’ I suddenly remembered Izzy saying with a sweep of her arm. ‘Take anything, Kristen. I’ve always wanted a daughter.’

‘I have a real present for you,’ Gram said around the candy in her mouth.

I looked after her, wondering, as she went into Izzy and the Old Man's bedroom and came back with something in her arms.

‘She's finished at last.’

It was my tree figure, with her sea-grass hair cascading down her back, half the size of Gram. She looked older than I was, but as I touched her face, the small nose, the large eyes, the tiny scar on the forehead, the arms out, I could see it was me.

But not me.

I looked closer, studying those eyes that were so sad it hurt to look at them, ran my fingers over those outstretched arms.

‘Giving arms,’ Gram said, nodding, bone-thin, like one of the little

birds that perched on the evergreen trees. I reached out to her, feeling those small shoulders, and hugged her to me.

Tears burned my eyes. 'She's beautiful,' I said.

'Do you think she looks like you?'

I held her out. 'She's not as tough,' I said, trying for a smile. 'She doesn't look like a mountain of trouble.'

Gram shook her head. 'Maybe you're tough when you need to be tough. But trouble? What would I ever have done without you?'

Gram put her hand under my chin and tilted it so that I had to look at her. 'I wish you could see yourself the way I see you.'

'But I am not-' I began, but she broke in.

'Not good? Not kind? Not there when you are needed?

Not anxious to be loved? You know that's not so.'

I did cry then, but just for a moment. If I had let myself go, I would have had a tough time stopping.

-And-

Then I saw that Gram was crying too.

‘I know you want to go home,’ I said, a jumble of thoughts in my mind. I wanted to say that we could be a family here, but she wanted to be in her own house, wanted to make Christmas cookies with Beatrice, and spend Tuesdays and Thursdays at the movies making popcorn.

We sat on the couch, Henry on Gram's lap, watching the candles glow in the late-afternoon light. The fire in the fireplace sent warm shadows over the

wood floor and the walls, and next to me Gram was closing her eyes. Her head went back to rest against the couch, and she was asleep.

I sat there too, half dozing, remembering that Greens' birthday was the next day. It hurt to think about it. I stood up slowly, quietly, and went into his room. I picked up the blurry picture from his dresser, half of the photo dark, the rest all blues and greens, with the faint figure in the center. It was the river, of course; I saw it then, with the holly bushes on the bank and just the faintest view of the Old Man's Mountain reaching

up in the back. There was the rowboat, and I was in it. I rolled a huge piece of wood onto the banked fire, thinking I would have to drag more in from the porch later.

Henry looked up at me, meowing, waiting to go out. I reached for the knob, pulling, and when the door opened, a gust of wind blew a swirl of snow inside. Henry stared at me angrily.

‘Not my fault,’ I told him, pushing the door closed again.

He went back to the couch, skinny tail twitching.

‘Sorry, cat.’ I ran my hand over the top of his head as I went into the kitchen to rummage through the cabinets.

Ah, how far away the hot cocoa woman was, locked in her house somewhere. How far away everyone was.

I thought of the Old Man, and Green’s, and Izzy. They were just a few miles away, but those few miles were forever. Did Green like the snow, or were they so used to storms like this that they never paid attention to them? I wondered if they ever thought about me the way I

did about them. I wondered how Green was now.

I could hear the Old Man's voice in my ears. I closed my eyes. Do not think of that, do not ever think of that terrible afternoon again.

I took out the box of cocoa with marshmallows and boiled a pot of water on the stove, thinking of what I would do today. Draw in front of that big window, I told myself. Figure out a way to shade in that soft line of trees, the gray ribbon of river. Charcoal would be wonderful for

that; I would even be able to use a chunk of burned wood from the fireplace.

I had done other firms in the past few days and taped them up around the living room: a snowshoe rabbit with his tall ears, four deer nibbling at the bark of the evergreen, the bridge covered in clear ice. I had done a few of Gram in the snow too, almost nothing but a few quick lines. She walked every day, down to the road, around the evergreens, coming back with her scarf blowing around her face.

What would happen if I left those films when we had to leave next spring?

What would the Old Man say when he
found them?

What would Izzy say? And
Green's?

Spring. Could I call Beatrice
then? She would have had months. What
would happen to me?

Who cared? I would think of
something. But I would never leave the
films. I would take them with me in my
backpack.

Sitting at the table, waiting for
the cocoa to cool, I thought about
Christmas. I had lost track of the days. I

flipped Izzy's wall calendar ahead to December, trying to figure it out. How long had we been here? Eight days? Nine? I counted back.

The water was ready. I mixed the cocoa and took a tiny sip, feeling the heat of it, the steam on my upper lip. Today could be Christmas Eve.

I stood there planning. When the snow stopped, I would get myself outside and take some of the Evergreen Laurel Highlands; there were so many trees we could fill rooms with them. We would trim the mantle with great heaps of green and

tuck Gram's ornaments among the needles. We would find a few pinecones too. We would have a special dinner tomorrow night. Fruit cocktail and canned tuna, a feast. And popcorn.

I wished I had a present for Gram. The only thing I could give her was a picture of herself. But the more I thought about it, the more I liked the idea. I would do that today instead of drawing trees. I took another sip of cocoa. What about Gram with Beatrice at the movies in front of their popcorn machine? Both would be eating, mouths full, arm in arm, smiling.

‘Sleigh bells ring,’ Gram sang,
coming into the kitchen behind me.

‘I was just thinking that.’ I
reached for another cup and poured in
water for cocoa.

She stopped to peer out the
window. ‘I’ve watched it snow on the
ocean,’ she said. ‘It melts as it hits the
water.’ She touched the glass with all five
fingers. ‘There is nothing like the ocean.’

I tried to think of something to
change the look in her eyes.

‘I was thinking we'd have a party,’ I told her, ‘with your ornaments and tree Laurel Highlands from outside.’

She smiled, looking up at the ceiling. ‘We could listen to carols on the radio,’ she said. ‘That's what Beatrice and I do every year-that and talk about when we were young. Where is Beatrice?’

‘Painting,’ I said. ‘It's warm where she is.’

Gram shook her head. ‘We always make almond cookies; we eat half and sell the other half at the movie.’

‘It would be nice if we had a radio.’ I popped two of our last pieces of bread into the toaster. ‘And too bad we don't have a few eggs around.’

‘Or almond syrup,’ she said.

‘Or better,’ I said, and we both laughed.

‘We'd have to ask Santa Claus,’ she said. ‘He'd bring it all to us on his...’ She paused, thinking.

‘Sleigh.’

She shook her head. 'That was a hundred years ago. Now he comes on a...' She looked up at the ceiling.

I laughed. 'A motorbike?'

'One of those snow things.' She nodded, laughing too.

'But how could we not have a radio? Everyone has a radio.'

I finished off my coco, one sweet marshmallow left in my mouth, trying to remember. Has there been a radio here? There was never television, I remembered that. But Gram was right, there must be a radio. I wandered around, searching, and

finally found one on a shelf, behind boxes of old jigsaw puzzles, the old cord wrapped around it. All that time Henry was stalking me, a line between his eyes as if he were frowning. He wanted to go out.

I went to the door again and cracked it. The snow was worse now, much worse. The line of trees had disappeared, and even the shed seemed far away. I was almost afraid to let Henry out. Before I could shut the door again, though, he darted around me and was gone. I stood there, shivering, trying to see where he was, and then he was back,

streaking through the door straight
across the living room, into the kitchen,
and onto Gram's lap.

I set up my drawing things in
front of the window, beginning the rough
lines that would turn into Gram. Gram
was there on the other side of the room,
at the table, fiddling with the radio knob
until she found a station with Christmas
music.

The announcer's voice: 'A lovely
Christmas Eve morning.'

I had hit the date straight on the
head.

The songs began, one after another: 'Adeste Fidelis,' 'Silent Night,' 'Winter Wonderland,' and one I'd never heard before: 'Gather 'Round the Christmas Tree.'

I leaned over the paper in front of me so Gram would not see what I was doing. I sketched in the space around Beatrice first, the counter, the popcorn machine, and then began to work on the faces. Every few minutes I would peer out at the snow coming down. Across the river the mountain was blurred, just a dark shadow rising into the pewter sky.

And then I thought about Gram
sitting there, my figure in her hand,
staring out the window too as she listened
to the music, her face tilted, her eyes sad.

Films of Kristen Deniel

I never really drew any of this. I
tried not to think about it. It kept coming
up inside my head, though, picture after
picture of what happened that last day.
Saturday. Izzy and the Old Man off on
some antique hunt up to Masonville.
Green's begging me to go fishing. 'We'll
take the boat all the way down to the
rapids,' he said. 'Bring our lunch.'

'You go,' I said, barely looking up from my drawing.

'Going to spend this entire day with a bunch of pencils in your mouth? Fooling around with bits of paper?'

I grinned at him over my shoulder.

Go, Green is, I thought. Get out of here.

And then he went with a great clatter, pail and oars, pole and lures, a sandwich dripping tomatoes out the side. 'You'll probably be sorry in two minutes,' he said.

He sounded sorry. 'Do you mind?'
I asked.

He grinned. 'Not really. But I will
be gone all day, I warn you.'

He climbed into the rowboat and
I watched him, his back bent, leaning
over the oars until he was gone.

I put everything away carefully,
my pad and pencils, cleaned up the
tomato mess in the kitchen, put away the
box of Mallomars, shut the refrigerator
door, and all the time I was thinking,
Three hours up, three hours back, a
cinch.

I grabbed a sweater just in case it was getting cold now- and at the last minute, I changed my mind and took a few pieces of paper folded in my pocket, a few pencils: green, gray, brown, and black, and the French Blue one. Who knew what I could use it for, but it was my favorite?

And then I began to climb. It was hot work; I draped the sweater over a tree limb. After a while, I could feel the pull in my ankles, the rub of my sneakers against my heels. I stopped at the halfway point to look down at the house, the snake

of the river, and I could see Green is a tiny figure in the rowboat.

I pulled out some paper, made a quick sketch, and climbed some more. Mud. The Old Man was right: It was deceptive. I could not tell it was there until I stepped into it, once covering the whole of my sneaker. I pulled the shoe out and wiped it off with a few leaves.

I was out of breath by the time I almost reached the top, and hungry. Why hadn't I made my tomato sandwich? There was water, though, a tiny thread of it trickling down from one of the rocks,

and I leaned my face into it and drank,
and put my wrists under it, and then took
the last few steps and I was there.

It opened out, a wide piece of
rock, and I danced out onto it, catching
my breath. I had brought dark pencils,
but this was a light world. I could see toy
houses, and the river, and even the town
of Hancock in the distance. There were a
tiny silver lake and a road with miniature
cars. 'It's Christmas!' I shouted.

I said all the things I wanted to.
'I'm new,' I said. 'I'm different.'

And in my head, I told myself I would never be mean again, I would be friendly, I would go to school and walk up to people. 'A new leaf,' I said.

I was twirling, dizzy, hungry, and the bubbles inside twirled with me until I took one step too close to the edge in that muddy sneaker, and then I was rolling, feeling the sharp edge of a branch tearing into my arm and a stone gashing into my forehead, and finally, a huge boulder stopped me a few feet down. The wind had been knocked out of me. I lay gasping.

I pulled myself back up. Not so bad, not so terrible, I told myself, wiping the blood out of my eye, except that I knew I would never be able to walk down by myself.

I did not begin to call Green is until much later until the sun had crossed toward the west and I knew it was late afternoon, and I did not want Izzy and the Old Man to know I had done such a stupid thing. And even as I called, I knew Green could not hear me.

But he came, of course, he came. Just before sunset I heard him, or I heard

the pickup truck, gears grinding and then stopping, the door slamming, and then he was standing over me.

‘I knew it,’ he said.

‘How?’

He narrowed his eyes. ‘Break any bones?’

‘Certainly not.’

‘I wasted my whole afternoon,’ he said. ‘Felt sorry that you were all alone, came back, and-’

‘Wasted-’

‘Right. I figured it out, though.
You weren't anywhere.’

‘So, why'd you bring the truck?’ I
asked.

‘Think I had three hours before
dark to walk up here to get you?’ He
shook his head. ‘I thought you'd been
killed.’

‘Just wounded,’ I said, laughing.

We sat on the edge of the rock,
watching the sun go down.

Green is pointed. ‘Our winter
place is somewhere over there. You'll see

it soon.' To the east far below was the summer house, the holly bushes a blur of green, the golden field, the thread of the river. It took my breath away.

'I want to show you something,' I told Green's. I reached into my pocket for the crumpled-up W picture I had taken out of my backpack before I had left. 'I've had it since I was six.'

We sat on a ledge, our feet dangling, and he smoothed the picture on his knee, stared at it, then looked over at me.

'We had to find films with W
words,' I said.

'It's a wishing picture,' he said
slowly, 'for a family.'

I could feel my lips trembling. Oh,
Mrs. Evans, I thought, why didn't you see
that?

'It's too bad you didn't come
when you were six.' He smiled. 'I knew
you had to stay with us when you let me
win that checkers game.'

His hair was falling over his
forehead and his glasses were crooked,
almost hiding his eyes. I thought of the X-

picture day and walking out of school. I thought of sitting in the park on a swing, my foot digging into the dirt underneath.

‘I run away sometimes,’ I said. ‘I don't go to school.’

He kicked his foot gently against the ledge, his socks down over his sneakers.

‘Someone called me incorrigible.’

Now that I had begun, I did not know how to stop. ‘Kids never wanted to play with me. I was mean....’

Green has pulled his glasses off and set them down on the ledge next to him. He rubbed the deep red mark on the bridge of his nose.

I stopped, looking out as far as I could, miles of looking out. For a moment I was sorry I had told him. But he turned and I could see his eyes and I wondered if he might be blinking back tears. I was not sure, though. He reached out and took my hand.

‘You ran in the right direction this time, didn't you?’

And that was it. He knew all about me, and he did not mind.

‘We have to go down now,’ he said, ‘before they come back and find out.’

I nodded. I stood up, and I could feel the pain shoot through my ankle. I limped to the pickup truck. ‘I’m glad you came,’ I said. ‘I could never have walked down.’ ‘It was a dumb thing to do,’ he said, ‘coming up here. Pop would have a fit.’

And so, we went down. Green is a sure and careful driver, but it was so

steep, and the truck kept going, kept sliding, even with the brake pressed down as hard as he could manage. He pressed and pressed, but the truck gained speed, and just before the end when we would have been all right when we would have been fine, the truck tipped, and I could see we were going to go over.

And Green is yelling at me. 'Jump, Holly!'

Films of Kristen Deniel

Late that afternoon the snow tapered off and stopped. I took a last look at the picture, pleased with it: Beatrice,

listening to something Gram is saying,
both with bags of popcorn in their hands.
I sneaked it into my room so that Gram
would not see it.

I put on all the clothes I could
find, and Izzy's boots, and went outside to
sink into the soft snow to my knees. The
cold was shocking. It stung the inside of
my nose and numbed my cheeks.

Everything was still. The birds
must have found nesting places for the
night, and the deer were hiding
somewhere deep in the Copses. The last
slim line of the river had frozen; if I had

not known it was there, I would have walked right across to the other side. I wondered if the ice would carry my weight yet.

I realized I would not be able to pick evergreen or holly Laurel Highlands from the ground. Anything the wind had brought down was under the snow. I would have to see off what I could.

Gram and Henry were framed in the window, waving to me. I reached down to scoop up a handful of white and tossed it at them. Then I trudged over to the shed for the Old Man's saw and found

Greens' sweater hanging on the knob,
encrusted with snow. I did not even
remember leaving it there. I folded it, put
it on one of the shelves, reached for the
saw, and spent the last bit of daylight
hacking away at Laurel Highlands,
making sure not to spoil the shapes of the
trees.

The wind was not as strong under
the shelter of those trees, and it reminded
me of something the Old Man had told
me.

Hunters who were lost would pull
the tree Laurel Highlands together with

rope, bending them to form a shelter. I loved the thought of that, the trees forming a cozy nest. And then I shivered, thinking of being alone.

You have Gram, Green might have said.

I love Gram, I said back.

From inside, music spilled from the radio. 'All I want for Christmas...'

What I want. What I want.

Gram was turning on the lamps now; the house was like a Christmas card with the light shining on the snow. I stood

there watching, wondering how far the
light might be seen.

I reached up for the last branch,
snow spraying my face. No one could
understand something at last anyway, I
told myself; it faced the river, away from
the road, and no one would be on the Old
Man's Mountain toward evening after a
storm like this.

'You're a snow sculpture,' Gram
said as I trudged onto the porch,
staggering under the milky Laurel
Highlands.

I pulled off Izzy's waders and rubbed my feet until the feeling came back. Gram danced around me. 'I have something for your dinner,' she said, delighted with herself. 'I was saving it for a surprise.'

She led me into the kitchen and opened the cabinet over the refrigerator. I thought I knew where everything was, but behind Izzy's old bowls and mixers was a row of treasures: a box of dried milk... milk!... pancake mix, and a jar of applesauce. 'Yes,' Gram said with satisfaction. 'We'll have apple pancakes for dinner with cold milk.'

My mouth watered. A Christmas
Eve dinner.

I will pay you back, Izzy, every
cent, if it takes me the rest of my life.

So, Gram cooked for the first
time, talking to me over her shoulder
about Beatrice. 'Ornaments sparkle on
the tree, and

Beatrice lights the candles.'

Every time Gram talked about
Beatrice, she came alive, I thought;
Beatrice and her house. I knew she was
homesick. 'We'll have Christmas here

too,' I told her. 'I'll set everything up after we eat.'

But after I had finished the pancakes covered with dollops of sweet applesauce, my eyes drooped; I was warm and sleepy.

'Let us do it all in the morning,' I said.

'Presents,' Gram said, a secret smile lighting her face. I curled up in bed, looking out the window at a pale moon and trees thick with snow, thinking I had never seen anything so beautiful. I could see movement at the edge of the trees

and sat up to see what it was. And then suddenly, a fox, silvery gray with his tail streaming out behind him, darted across that open space, crossed the ice, and was gone.

I saw a fox, Green's. I have never seen a fox before.

I lay back, trying to figure out what Gram might have for me. She had found another package of food. I fell asleep wondering what it was, what I would like it to be: something sweet, something chocolate, or salty. Potato chips.

The next morning, the sun was blinding. And the shed glittered like the witch's house in Hansel and Gretel. I lay there, something on the edge of my mind. What was it? Something about the shed? Or was I wondering what the Old Man would think if he knew I was spending Christmas in his house?

I did not want to think about that. But there was something else. Was it Gram's present for me? An egg was what I wanted this morning. What I could do with an egg! I would bake a cake or cookies. I would whip it up for eggnog. I would fry it like a little sun in a pan.

I threw on my clothes. The house still smelled of the pancakes from last night. I went into the kitchen.

At that moment the back door opened, and Gram came in, her scarf pulled over her forehead, her nose red.

I wanted to tell her she should not be out there, that it was too cold, the snow too deep. But I would sound like the stucco woman. I turned back to the stove. 'Coco with milk,' I said.

We hurried through breakfast, and afterward, I went out on the porch to shake the snow off the Laurel Highlands

before I brought them inside. I covered the mantelpiece, the sharp pine smelling like Christmas, as Gram unwrapped the box of ornaments. 'Here's my old Santa Claus.' I could hear the tears in her voice as she hung him in the center. 'And this one.' She held up a thick pink plastic globe. 'Ugly, isn't it? It's the only kind we could get during the Second World War.'

She went on, telling me the history of each one until the mantel was finished and the center of the table held a bowl of holly. 'We'll even hang a few of those glittery ornaments over the window

to catch the light,' I said aloud, and to myself, please be happy, Gram.

'Presents now?' Gram asked.

'Maybe,' I said absently. I had caught movement outside as I hung the last clear prism.

We watched as seven or eight deer wandered in front of the house, making their way toward the evergreens. Suddenly something disturbed them. Heads back, noses up, they stood stock-still for an instant, then scattered, two to bound across the river ice as the fox had

last night, the others in the opposite direction, toward the bridge.

I tried to see what had bothered them. I looked toward the evergreens myself, looked back as far as I could. There was no light anywhere, nothing to make me think about a fisher being out there somewhere.

I had a quick thought of the night on the mountain with the flashlights like glow worms above me.

It was then I remembered:
Green's sweater, a flash of green in the snow as I backed away from the fisher

that day. I had not left it on the doorknob in the shed. I opened my mouth to ask Gram if she had picked it up when she had been outside. But Gram would never remember. I did not want to know the answer, anyway, thinking of the fisher finding us and what might happen then.

Films of Kristen Deniel

I could not get warm, even though I wore a robe and Izzy's sweater on top of that. Every time I drifted off to sleep that August night, I would start, thinking someone was there. I would look around the darkroom, but it was empty. I

would close my eyes again, and then I
would think I was falling, my head
jerking, arms up, legs braced, a scream in
my throat, and that feeling in my chest as
we went over the side.

But I did not sleep. I kept going
over it: the sound first, a screeching
metal, tearing, as if the truck were dying,
the wheel swerving, a tree slowing us
down, its Laurel Highlands cracking,
breaking, leaves covering the windshield,
a rock ripping at the underside, the truck
bouncing now, not so muddy, gravel and
roots and Green's hands off the wheel, the

sound of glass shattering, a tire
spinning...

And then everything was still.

We were down the Old Man's
Mountain, and next to me Green is with
his head on the wheel. I reached for him,
my heart pounding, shook his shoulder.
'Don't do this,

Green's,' I said. 'Don't be dead.'

I pushed him back, his head
against the seat now, his face white in the
dusky inside of the truck. Not a mark on
him that I could see, but he was hurt, I
was sure, really hurt. He was not dead,

though. There was a thin pulsing on the side of his neck, his eyes moving under the broken glasses. I took them off gently and heard him say something. Loon Sister. I could hear the S. It was Sorry.

‘Green’s, I have to get help.’ I watched him for another moment, then scrambled out of the truck, feeling the pull of my ankle, telling myself I had to do it, had to go as quickly as I could. I began the climb back up, wondering how long it would take to get down the mountain road, cross the bridge, and reach the house.

And then I thought, No telephone.

What then?

I was there when I saw the sweep of headlights going across the bridge. Izzy and the Old Man coming home?

When they saw me, Izzy leaned out the window, calling, 'I bought dishes, Kristen. You're going to love them.' And then she stopped. 'Child, you're bleeding.'

'The truck!' I spoke.

'What has he done?' the Old Man said. 'What has he done now? You can hardly walk!'

It seemed to take forever before lights flickered on the mountain and cars began to park diagonally down below. Turret lights turned and glowed, and an ambulance came from Walton, its siren screaming. They brought Green down at last, but all I could see was one foot, the sneaker, the socks falling over his ankles.

A police officer shook his head, talking to Izzy and the Old Man as I stood to one side, out of everyone's way. 'If it were not your mountain, if it were not private property, your boy would be in trouble. As it is-'

‘As it is,’ Izzy's voice cut in, ‘we have to hope he'll be all right.’

And I had looked over my shoulder at the Old Man's face, his clenched jaw.

In the emergency room, a doctor took five stitches to close my forehead and wrapped an Ace bandage around my ankle.

Green has been somewhere inside too, and I did not even know what was happening to him.

We went home later that night, much later, Izzy and I, Izzy stayed just

long enough to put me to bed, to cover me and tell me it would be all right, to touch my cheek and my chin. 'Just sleep,

Kristen,' she said. 'Everything will seem better in the morning.' And then she went back to the hospital to wait.

I thought about the stucco woman. She would not have been surprised at the trouble I had caused. She would have seen it coming. Would Greens have driven the truck to the top of the mountain if I had not been there? And the arguing between Green's and the Old

Man-what had Izzy said? 'Worse this summer.'

I had messed up the whole family.

Before it was light, I packed my things in the backpack. They did not all fit, so I left a small pile of miscellaneous items, and the bathing suit that was drying on the line. I tore off a sheet of paper from my drawing pad and wrote the note: It was my fault, all of it. I wanted to see the mountain. I am going back to Long Island.

Please do not come after me. I do not want to be a family.

I looked back as I left, to take a picture of it all in my mind, thinking how strange it was to use my running money to run back to the stucco woman. It was even stranger that she let me walk in there so easily, clucking over my bandage, taking me to the doctor a week later to have the stitches out.

Emmy, agency hotshot, came to see me tell me Green was going to be all right. 'His ribs are broken,' she said, 'and the bones in his arms are fractured.' While her mouth was still open, ready to say something else, I told her 'I never

want to go back, I never want to see any of them again.'

She tried to find out why, but when I just kept looking out the window, banging my feet on the chair rung, she sighed and let me stay with the stucco woman.

I did not do that, either. I lasted there through most of September, and then I ran.

How could I not have seen that the other day?

'Hey, stop rowing,' he said. 'I'm going to take your picture.'

I looked up at him, feeling the sun on my face, feeling the happiness down to my toes, as he stood at the river's edge and snapped the picture.

'You've got a smiley face,' he said. 'We could put you on a stamp and sell it all over Laurel Highlands.'

'Too bad you did not take your thumb off the lens,' I told him.

'Too bad you dropped the oar,' he said. 'It's floating away.'

I put the picture back carefully, then went downstairs for sweaters and pulled my jacket off the hook. Something

fell out as I did. It was the shell I had picked up the first time I had seen Gram's ocean. I held it up to my face before I put it back into my pocket.

I needed to be outside. I needed to be cold, so cold I could not think of anything but the ice and the snow.

Anything, that is what the stucco woman would say.

Films of Kristen Deniel

For all, I know this picture might still be in the agency conference room. It is a drawing of a small office with beige paneling on the walls. The paneling is

fake wood. There is a table in the center, someone's initials, TR, gouged out of the wood. The picture is not finished, but Emmy and the hot cocoa woman did not know that. They thought the girl sitting at the table was me. Of course, it was not me. This girl was laughing. She was just make-believe.

I was not laughing when I sat there. I was sitting as straight as I could, but I could feel my knees shaking.

‘Mr. Regan wants to talk to you,’ Emmy said.

I shook my head, never looking at her, sketching on the paper.

She leaned forward. 'He's come down here, Holly.'

'Kristen.'

'Just see what he has to say.'

I shook my head again, but Emmy patted my hand and was out the door.

And then he was there, standing in front of me, and I still did not look up. 'I'm sorry,' I said in a voice so low I was not sure he heard me.

'It was Green's fault,' he said.

‘No,’ I said.

‘He took the truck-’ I could see him wave his hand.

‘Kristen, it doesn't matter. We just want you home.’

I thought about standing up. I wanted to put my arms around him, then going out to the car with him. I thought of what it would be like to drive up to their front door.

‘I didn't tell Izzy and Green’s I was coming,’ he said. ‘If I had, they would have come too. I had to make sure you wanted to be with us first.’

Izzy would be standing at the door, and Green is next to her. We would be hugging each other, all of us. There would be pancakes and hard candy.

But that was just for a moment.

‘It wasn't Green's fault,’ I said. ‘I went up the mountain first.’

‘It doesn't make any difference.’

He was blaming Green's. If I went home with him, they would always blame Green's. ‘He thinks you're perfect,’ Green's had said. Before I could change my mind, I shook my head. ‘I think I'll stay down here.’

He tried to talk me out of it. I was not even hearing what he said. I stopped drawing; my hands were clenched under the table, and I never once looked up at him. After a while, he left.

Emmy came back in with tears in her eyes.

‘You want tough?’ I asked. ‘I’ll show you though.’

I grinned. The Old Man knew a lot. But I would not tell Green’s that either.

I talked for another minute, telling Beatrice we would go home soon,

telling her we were all right, we were fine, and then I hung up the phone.

Green yanked off his gloves with his teeth, reached for more change, and laid it out on the shelf. 'I bet you don't even know our phone number,' he said as he began to dial.

I could hear Izzy's larger-than-life voice. 'Is that you, Green's?'

He handed the phone to me, then let himself out of the phone booth to stand outside, stamping his feet.

'It's me, Izzy,' I said. 'Do you think I could come home?'

Ah, and the house in Laurel Highlands. Green's house. Nevertheless, that home was dissimilar. I would never-ever fail to recall that one. Do not think about it, Green is said in my cranium. I did that a lot; I pretended Green's was right there next to me when I knew he was miles away in upstate Philadelphia.

The next day all the kids, like me were fighting over the crumbs of not having anything- and with that comes not having much to eat either, and if you were lucky enough to get your hands on anything at all, that resembled food. And let us not fail to mention the haughty long

scraggly haired old woman; she was the power at be, also it was odd to me that there were no rugs- just sub-floors...

‘What...,’ Kristen began. She reached up to feel her cheek, the first time she could ever remember Gram kissing her when it was not time to leave for school or to go to bed. She put her arms around Gram. ‘Grannie,’ she whispered so softly she did not know if Gram had heard.

Halfway down the road, Kristen could smell the fish cooking. She could hear Poppy talking, and the rumble of Mr.

Meyer's voice. Mr. Meyer's Ford was in the driveway, the headlights still painted black. She would help him scrape them off first thing tomorrow.

Gram was looking toward her and leaned over suddenly to kiss Kristen's cheek. 'It was a long war, a terrible war,' she said, 'but sometimes, even in the worst times, something lovely happens.'

I wondered if he ever said to himself, 'What is Kristen Deniel doing right this moment?' And did he put my words in his mind at all? The woman

turned off the motor of the car something from the late 1924's is all I can say.

For a moment, we looked out at the trees, the leaves- in bolshies of rosy reds, yellow oakum golds, and bright burnt orange, with just a tinge of greens this late October evening.

'We're here, Kristen,' she said, a woman in sweats, a hot cocoa stain on the front from the hot dogs we had eaten on the side of the road. Those hot dogs were a mean lump in the middle of my stomach, sloshing around with a Cola. They walked down to the Smiths on the

roadside, the tufts of grass bright against the sand, Kristen carrying the cat along with her.

Kristen made a face in the mirror, then scooped up a handful of water for her face. 'I'm ready,' she said, 'ready now.'

3

Now Gram was knocking at the bathroom door. 'Poppy's gone down to the Smiths' ahead of us,' she said, 'and if you don't hurry in there, the dinner will be ruined. They're all waiting...'

She had tried to talk all the way,
but I had not answered. I slumped in my
seat, feet up on the glove compartment,
wearing the dress with a matching hat
and gloves with the hat low over my
forehead. If someone looks into your eyes,
I read in a book one time, he will see right
into your soul.

I did not want anyone to see into
my soul. I knew she was dying to tell me
to get my sneakers off her dashboard, but
she did not. She was waiting to deliver
her speech.

Kristen thought about her problem list for the first time in a long time. Lies, and Daydreaming, and Friends need. She did not lie anymore. Every time she started to lie, she thought of Noah and closed her mouth. She still daydreamed, though. Sister Sara had told her that all writers did that and that if you knew the difference between lies and daydreams you were in decent shape.

I could hear her getting ready for it with a puff of breath. 'This can be a fresh start, Kristen. A new place.' She licked her finger and scratched at the hot cocoa stain. 'No one knows you.

You can be different, you can be good, know what I mean?’

She gave that speech to every foster kid in every driveway as she dumped them off like the mail guy dumping off packages on a busy day, but I did not think so. I had looked into her eyes once, just the quickest look, and I had seen that she felt sorry for me, that she did not know what to do with me. Too bad for you, hot coco woman.

Kristen did not wait to hear the rest. Mrs. Meyer would know about Noah and May. She went into the bathroom

quickly to comb her hair and run water over her hands. The water came in spurts at first, the way it always after the winter. Kristen leaned forward to look in the mirror, wondering if she looked different this year. She closed her eyes, remembering that Friday night last summer, getting ready to go to the Smiths,' and Gram holding the washcloth over her red eyes after she had cried for Poppy. And she thought about Noah, with his dark hair and blue eyes. I hummed a little of 'The Worms Sneak In, the Worms Creep Out.'

‘She was an art teacher,’ the hot cocoa woman said, pointing to the house. ‘Retired now. I’ve never met her, but everyone at the agency says she’s wonderful with kids...’ Her voice trailed off, but I knew she had meant to say, ‘kids like you.’

If only Noah was there. I walked my feet up the dashboard, so my knees came close to my chin.’ No one’s been here with her for a while, but Emmy said it would be a good place for you.’ ‘A good place for an artist like you, Kristen,’ the hot cocoa woman said. ‘Mr. Regan...’ Emmy, the agency hotshot. I drew in my

breath. The Old Man. I closed my eyes as if I were ready to doze off. 'He wanted you to have a chance to work at your drawings. He said it would be a crime if you didn't.' 'It's Friday night,' Gram said over her shoulder. 'The Smiths want us to come for dinner.'

Wash your face and...'

4

Someone was fishing from a rowboat, one of the kids from Broad Channel. Kristen raised her arm to wave and smiled as the girl waved back.

Under her feet, the porch floor was gritty. Any minute Gram would be calling, telling her to give it a quick sweep, and find the sheets, and get her bed ready. Kristen reached for her book and flipped through until she found the star. She had taken it off her ceiling last night as she packed. She put a dab of glue on it and pasted it behind the bed with the others, smiling a little. Then she went into the kitchen for the broom. She had said,

‘What have we got to lose?’

Still holding the cat, Kristen wandered out to the porch and leaned on the screen. She smelled the bay and listened to the water lapping against the pilings.

Now the church bells were chiming five. Kristen followed Poppy along the path to the house. Gram had opened the door and the windows on the porch. 'Blowing the winter out,' she said, looking up. 'And here's Tom's cat.' But next to me, the hot cocoa woman took a deep breath. I cut my eyes in the direction of the house. I was good at that, seeing everything without turning my

head, without looking up, without blinking.

I tried to yawn, but then the front door opened, and a woman came out on the porch with a mangy orange cat one step behind her. I did not bother to give them more than a glance. What did I care about what the woman looked like? 'Lordy,' the hot cocoa woman breathed.

Not even the hot chocolate was covering that up. I sat up straight, wondering if I should open the car door and run, or reach out to push the button down, locking myself in. I did blink then,

of course, I did. Anyone getting a first look at Gram Cahill would do the same. It was not just that she was movie-star beautiful, or that she was wearing a blue dress made of filmy stuff that floated around her, and rings on eight of her fingers. It was this: She had a knife in one hand. She held it in front of her so it caught the glint of late-afternoon sunshine and became a silvery light itself. 'It's me,' Kristen said, her hand out, reaching.

'Don't you remember?'

And then the cat was in her arms,
its orange coat short, rough, and warm
from the sun. Kristen bent her head,
rubbing her chin against the cat's head,
listening to the sound of its rusty purring.
She thought of Tom, and last summer,
and Christy. Kristen climbed the
boardwalk steps slowly as the cat stood
there, moving back a step each time she
moved forward. The knife woman came
close enough for me to see that the
movie-star face had dozens of tiny
crisscross lines on its cheeks and across
its forehead.

But then she smiled, and the lines around her mouth rearranged themselves. She leaned forward and put one hand on the car window. 'Kristen,' she said. 'Are you here, then?'

I could not take my eyes off her. I could feel a pencil in my hand, moving across the paper, drawing her face, her eyes, the knife. I reached over the seat, grabbed my backpack, and was out the door, slamming it behind me. 'Poppy, look,' Kristen said. 'It's Tom's cat. The Smiths must have kept her after Noah went back to Canada.'

Suppose she never saw Noah again? She leaned over to cup her hands in the water, to splash a little on her face. Her skirt, let loose, plastered itself against her legs.

They stood there for another moment before they went toward the boardwalk together, Kristen picking up one sock looking around for the other one. And then she saw the cat, standing there, watching her, ready to run. Kristen could feel the dryness in her mouth, the sand beginning to blow against her face, stinging. 'Pap?' she asked. Slowly she held out her hand.

She dug her toes into the sandy bottom, picturing her words sliding out to see the way the waves did out to Europe. 'You're my best friend, Tom,' she whispered, 'the best friend I ever had...'

Then Poppy was in the back of her, his strong hands around her shoulders, pulling her into the dry warmth of his shirt.

Films of Kristen Deniel

This was not one picture, it was six, eight, ten. I never could get Green's right. I could see him in my head, though, close my eyes, and there he was. That

first day, I was sick to my stomach from the smell of the bus, the dizzying mountain roads. I had been on that bus for hours. It seemed like weeks. The tag pinned to my shirt, Kristen COPSES, LONG ISLAND, had rubbed a raw patch into my neck. All I could think about was how thirsty I felt. I imagined ice cubes in my mouth, burning my tongue, ginger ale in a glass that was wet to the touch, root beer with two scoops of orange sherbet. I was on my way to a place called Laurel Highlands to spend the summer with a family named Regan. 'I'll be good if you don't make me go,' I had almost told the

woman I was living within the stucco house. 'I won't make a sound, you'll see.' Instead, I squeezed my lips in between my teeth so hard they were hidden inside my mouth and shot lightning rays at her out of the corners of my eyes. 'Fresh air, a place in the country,' the stucco woman said, 'that's what you need.' She did not mean it, though. I heard her on the phone. 'Two months,' she said, 'two months to do what I please and not have to worry about that kid getting into everything.' She's a mountain of trouble, that Kristen Copses.' I marched up the stairs, hitting every rung with her lime

green umbrella. Anyway, I was the last one left on the bus. Up in front, the driver talked with the woman from the agency. If I ducked down in the back of the seat, would they forget about me? Would they turn around and go back to Long Island? We lumbered up the main street of Hancock, passing a row of houses and a movie theater, and came to a stop in front of a diner.

The pelican looked as irritable as Henry. I told myself I would have a house like that one day: hat boxes and wigs have drawn on one-bathroom wall, and high-heeled shoes, dozens of them, marching

along in watercolor in a tiny bedroom at the end of the hall.

That yellow kitchen was huge. A couch sat under the window, piled high with embroidered pillows that said things like HENRY'S HOME, V FOR VICTORY, SAVE THE SARGASSO SEA.

I had never even heard of the Sea.

I had drawn the house with paper from my backpack and fat bits of charcoal I had found somewhere. It was lovely to sketch the house and Gram with her scarf. She watched me sometimes as I

drew Henry sitting on top of the old-fashioned radio, and the pelican with beady eyes.

5

Too bad you do not have your drawing box, I imagined

Green's saying all those yellows and blues. I was all right, though.

'We'll take a drive in the Silver Bullet today,' Gram said, sounding pleased with herself. She brushed a few shavings off the front of her dress onto the faded linoleum floor. 'I have things to show you, Kristen.' No school on a

Monday? I shrugged to myself. If she wanted to forget about it, that was fine with me. I spent most of the time in the back of the classroom sketching, or drawing faces in ink on the plastic desk and erasing them with one wet finger. 'Everything,' I said, putting my tongue against my top teeth in front of her face. 'Fresh.' She cupped her hand over the phone. 'Fresh as paint.' And back to the phone, whispering now: 'No wonder she hasn't been adopted.'

'Straighten up, kid,' the bus driver said, looking into the rearview mirror. 'We're here.' I gathered up my

backpack and the plastic bag they had given me: a toothbrush, a bar of soap that smelled like an old sock, a pink washcloth, and a book for drooling two-year-old is, Jo Anne Goes Camping. I tossed the book in the agency woman's lap as I passed, nose in the air, pretending I was not dying of thirst, pretending I was not bursting from having to go to the bathroom. Outside the bus window, a man leaned against the wall of the diner, his hat over his eyes, and a boy played handball against a brick wall. I climbed down into the blistering hot sun, checking out the boy.

A skinny mess he was, much taller than I, his socks falling. They looked as if they did not even match. As the bus started up, the exhaust smelled like a sewer, the boy slammed the ball against the wall, missing it on its way back. He nearly killed himself trying to dive in front of the bus for it, then jumped back at the last moment as the ball bounced across the street. I put down my backpack and the agency freebie bag darted across the street in the back of the bus and scooped up the ball with one hand. I trotted back to them, tossing it over my head and catching it a couple of times just to show

them what I could do. The man pushed his hat back and grinned at me. He had a great face to draw: eyes the color of cinnamon toast, a prickly gray-black beard, deep laugh lines. 'I'm Green's Regan,' the boy said, grinning. 'How'd you get a name like that, Kristen Copses, crazy name? Do they call you Holly? We have a pile of holly bushes out in front. Touch the leaves and they draw blood. I'm going to call you Holly.' The man shook his head. 'Green's.' 'Try it,' I cut in. 'How old are you anyway?' Green asked, his eyes caramel behind his glasses. 'You look like a kind of shrimp to me.'

‘Twelve,’ I said, bumping it up a year, ‘and tough.’ ‘Baby. I’ll be thirteen December twenty-sixth.’ He rushed on. ‘We’re having lunch at the diner. My mother stayed in Laurel Highlands.’ ‘Izzy’s making carrot cake,’ the man said. I thought about saying I hated carrots-not true, I ate nothing. Anything, the stucco house lady would say. Besides, they were standing there, Green’s and his father, looking so pleased about having lunch in the diner and carrot cake for dinner, I did not have the heart, and I had to go to the bathroom.

‘Bet you're thirsty.’ Green's eyes narrowed. ‘They've got checkers at every table. I'll play you, beat you.’ He wanted to pay me back for the ball trick. His father frowned. He knew it too. But I was all right with it; I was fine with it. I skittered into the diner, straight to the restroom, and then sat with them at their table drinking root beer floats, cold and sweet, with wet napkins underneath the glasses. After I had downed half of mine, Green is ticked off the things he wanted me to know. ‘I call the old man Pop,’ he said. ‘You can call me that,’ the father said. I took a chance. ‘I'm going to call

you Old Man.' He laughed. 'Try it.' I could tell he did not mind, though. 'What's next is I'm a walker,' Green said. 'Walk me-myself and I, all over Laurel Highlands. I'll walk you, too.' 'Maybe,' I said. 'I know motors,' he said. 'I drive a truck.' 'Don't believe that.' The Old Man snorted. 'Not even thirteen years old.' 'I almost drive, then,' Green said, giving me a wink. 'Legal any day now.' The Old Man rolled his eyes at me. 'And the last thing, I know tracks.' Green's spread his arms wide. 'Animal Tracks. All of them.' I was laughing. I knew he meant for me to laugh. He pushed the black checkers over

to me. 'Let us see what you can do here, Kristen Copses,' he said. 'Win and I'll teach you how to drive.' 'In your dreams,' the Old Man said. We played a couple of checkers games, Green is taking wild chances, while we dripped ketchup from our hamburgers onto the table and the Old Man egged us on. Anyway, the picture I was trying for was Green's playing checkers with me that first day. That was the picture I could never get perfect. It was because he let me win that first game; it was because I let him win the next one. And it was because for the

first time I saw what it might be like to have a brother.

Today the water was almost calm. Tiny waves folded on themselves, then slid out to sea, leaving small fingers of foam on the damp sand. Kristen waded in, bunching up her skirt. The water was icy cold on her feet and ankles, numbing. She looked out at the gray triangular rock that jutted out near the end of a jetty, the place where she and Noah had first looked-for Europe.

She pressed her forehead against the car window, staring at the marshes,

watching a seagull as it swooped down toward the pale reeds. She did not want Gram or Poppy to know her eyes were prickling and her throat was tight.

‘The same,’ Poppy said. ‘I told you. It’s all the same.’ Kristen and Gram looked at each other, nodding, remembering. It would never be the same.

And then they were there. She hardly waited for the car to stop moving before she was out the back door, running for the sand and the water. She kicked off her shoes and left them on the empty

boardwalk, peeling off socks halfway
across the beach.

(1945)

It was summer at last. Kristen
was wedged in the backseat of Poppy's
old Ford with the suitcases, and bags, and
rolled-up sweaters. Her feet, resting on
Gram's tackle box, were tangled in a mess
of fishing line.

They were going back to
Ridgway, back to the house stilts, back to
the hills at last.

The Ford had new tires now, and
gas in the tank, and three of them,

Kristen. Poppy and Gram sang with the breeze coming in through the open windows. Kristen knew they were there when they passed Lynnnatta's house. The bottom-floor windows were still shuttered, but the one in the attic was shiny and almost black in the sun's reflection. Lynnette would not be there this summer, might never come back to Ridgway. Eddie was still lost somewhere in France, and Gram had heard that Mrs. Dillon could not bear to be there without him.

‘Listen, Kristen...’ Gram turned in the front seat, tucking strands of her hair

into her bun. Kristen could feel it even before she saw it: the bridge and the galumphing sound as the tires hit each plank. 'It's saying, 'Welcome back, welcome back.' 'Gram raised her plump arms in the air. 'Alleluia.' Kristen nodded a little, but the bridge was not saying that for her. It was saying, 'he is gone, he is gone.'